DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 278 141 EA 019 140

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TITLE Salt Lake City's Systemwide Approach to Instructional Improvement.
PUB DATE 7 Nov 86
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Career Ladders; Curriculum Development; Elementary Secondary Education; Faculty Development; *Instructional Improvement; Instructional Leadership; Organizational Objectives; School Districts; Teacher Administrator Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Salt Lake City School District UT

ABSTRACT

This paper identifies the five instructional improvement goals set by the Salt Lake City (Utah) School District and describes the activities undertaken by the district in pursuit of those goals. The goals are (1) to develop an instructional program with clear learning objectives, including those mandated by the state; (2) to develop a comprehensive model of effective teaching and a systematic program of teacher evaluation; (3) to develop an appropriate mix of criterion- and norm-referenced student evaluation tools; (4) to develop a positive and effective learning environment in each school; and (5) to enhance the teacher's role by developing a career ladder, offering year-round employment to selected teachers, and involving teachers in the achievement of the first four goals. The paper gives particular attention to the establishment of effective and collaborative working arrangements among teachers and administrators, the major features of the career ladder system, the district's attitudes toward curriculum development, and the administrator's role as an instructional leader. (PGD)

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SALT LAKE CITY'S SYSTEMWIDE APPROACH TO INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT

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The most important factor in improving instruction is that of board members, administrators and teachers working together to achieve common goals. In fact, instructional improvement efforts in a school district are not likely to make much headway until its leaders can agree on goals and on roles and relationships of participants at all levels in planning and implementing improvement strategies. Salt Lake City School District has agreed upon five instructional improvement goals:

1. To develop, coordinate and articulate an instructional program with clear learning objectives, including but not limited to state mandated curriculum objectives.

2. To develop a clear, comprehensive model of effective teaching and a systematic program of teacher evaluation designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning throughout the district.

3. To develop an appropriate mix of criterion and norm referenced assessment tools to monitor student learning related to the instructional goals of the district.

4. To develop an educational climate in each school that is highly energized by the excitement and wonder of learning, and is continually renewed through the habit of inquiry, exploration and discovery.

5. To develop a career ladder to attract and retain superior teachers; offer year-round employment for some teachers; and employ the energy, professional knowledge and skills of teachers to achieve the first four goals more quickly and successfully than would otherwise be the case.

These five goals direct all of our instructional improvement efforts.

If a school district is to have a well coordinated instructional program from grade level to grade level, some decisions and activities will need to occur district-wide. Flexibility is needed, however, so individual schools can gear the instructional program to their own students. Within the school, some decisions and activities should be determined by classroom teachers. In developing its instructional improvement model, Salt Lake City School District has addressed the question of what decisions should be made at the different levels for the best results.

In our view, district efforts should focus on creating an educational mission statement, identifying district-wide learning objectives and a scope and sequence of skills and/or content needed to attain these objectives, training building-level instructional leaders and formulating test items to

EA 019 140

student mastery of the learning objectives. Individual schools should concentrate on implementing and evaluating the curriculum, helping teachers to improve their skills, assessing student learning in relation to objectives, creating a climate of high expectations and serious study, and providing teachers both formative and summative evaluation data.

We believe nothing is as central to excellent instruction as competent classroom teachers. Our model gives top priority to recruiting, developing and retaining superior teachers. Our primary means of building a first rate core of teachers is a career ladder which offers professional advancement based on performance and contributions to the improvement of instruction. Many able teachers are discontented with a career that does not increase the challenges, responsibilities and remuneration for their abilities and professional contributions. Many need expanding career opportunities, which the Salt Lake City Career Ladder provides.

The career ladder was established under state legislation in the 1984-85 school year. Every district in the state then began some kind of program. The models varied widely under very broad, flexible state guidelines. The Salt Lake City Career Ladder was designed by district teachers and administrators to improve instructional quality by developing a cadre of teachers to upgrade curriculum, teaching processes and means of assessing student learning. Approximately $2-1/2 million--or 8% of the total teacher payroll--is currently committed to the career ladder program.

At the apex of the ladder is the teacher leader position, occupied by about 12% of the district's 1200 teachers. Because this position provides a $1500 stipend and 25 to 30 days of fully paid work beyond the normal teaching calendar, the salary of some teacher leaders increased over $6,000 as a result of their appointment. Another 30% of the teachers are teacher specialists, who are given 2 to 4 days of additional work and a $1200 stipend. Most of the teacher leadership positions are school based and function according to job descriptions developed there. All job descriptions are designed to promote instructional improvement and are not intended to be managerial functions.

The career ladder is upgrading the quality of instruction in a number of ways. In the early stages, teachers and administrators developed criteria for evaluating teachers and a means for gathering evaluative data. To be promoted on the ladder, teachers must demonstrate proficient teaching and student management skills. Most of our teachers are endeavoring to qualify for promotion by demonstrating teaching proficiency. This has become a powerful stimulus for improving teaching performance.

Teacher leaders are being trained to teach school faculties critical teaching skills identified from the research on teaching. In the past two summers, over 200 teacher leaders and all building administrators spent several days together learning about such concepts as elements of lesson design, motivation, reinforcement and retention. Additional content has been identified to be taught over the next three summers. After principals and teacher leaders learn the concepts, they return to their individual schools as a training team and systematically teach the faculty members. This format gives the entire professional staff a common conceptual framework and vocabulary with which to discuss issues of teaching and learning. Principals then reinforce the concepts learned through systematic classroom observations and feedback sessions, and address them further in the summative evaluations of

teachers. Principal training emphasizes skill development in clinical supervision and teacher evaluation. Principals know that their own evaluation focuses on instructional leadership skills.

This system of administrators and key teachers working together to share effective teaching strategies fosters cohesiveness of the school staffs and helps reduce professional isolation. There is evidence of more dialogue about instructional issues and a sense of shared responsibility for student outcomes. Principals are no longer the only ones expected to give instructional leadership in the schools. Teacher leaders observe and give feedback to other teachers, especially those in their first two years of teaching. Our teacher leaders and teacher specialists have displayed impressive leadership skills and expertise that were much less frequently used before the advent of the career ladder. Their talent and expertise are being used advantageously in each school. For this, career ladder teachers are rewarded monetarily and through professional recognition from colleagues.

The issue of what should be taught is complicated by the explosive growth of knowledge and the pluralistic nature of our society. The Utah State Board of Education has determined there are certain core concepts all students should learn regardless of abilities, interests and plans for the future. At the elementary level, the core curriculum focuses on literacy skills. Mastery of these skills is formally assessed at the end of the third and sixth grade. The core curriculum at the secondary level is organized by traditional subjects, with formal assessment at grades 8, 10 and 12. The emphasis is on mastery of core concepts and skills--not seat time.

Salt Lake City School District is incorporating the state core into the curriculum and identifying additional concepts to be included. Teacher leaders and specialists will provide most of the leadership in this endeavor; they will help train and assist all teachers to implement the core and develop criterion-referenced tests to assess student mastery of core concepts. Within two years, all teachers are expected to have the equivalent of a major or minor in the subject(s) they teach. The district will help teachers with deficiencies to reach the required standard.

The instructional improvement model places a high priority on improving the instructional leadership skills of principals. We see a strong relationship between the leadership of the principal and effective schools. We expect our building administrators to be able to teach and demonstrate principles of effective teaching; observe and give objective, analytical feedback to teachers on their teaching behavior; assist in developing and implementing curriculum; evaluate teachers; plan and conduct staff development activities; interpret and use student test data to improve the instructional program; and maintain a school climate that is highly energized by the excitement and wonder of learning.

These expectations are new to many principals. All principals are receiving intensive training designed to help them develop or further refine the expected competencies. Under the career ladder, principals are becoming leaders of instructional improvement teams comprised of the principal, assistant principals (in the secondary schools) and teacher leaders. Skillful principals can greatly increase their influence by engaging the talents and expertise of teacher leaders and specialists to achieve the instructional improvement goals of the school.

To gain overall leadership for the district's improvement plan, we conducted a nation-wide search last year to hire the best available candidates to serve as Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, Assistant Superintendent for Staff Development and Director of Elementary Education. Two people were hired from outside the district, one from within. These leaders work closely with the superintendent, principals and curriculum coordinators to implement the model.

We are attempting to avoid temporary fads and quick fixes. Instructional improvement efforts are guided both by annual goals and longer range goals for the next five years. Strong efforts are being made to build partnerships among school board members, district administrators and the schools. We believe lasting improvement comes from clear purposes, consistent leadership at all levels, the flexibility to adapt to creative change and a well conceived evaluation process. Our instructional improvement model provides the vision, direction and means of enhancing teaching and learning in the district.

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